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# Commencement address

Douglas M. Knight

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COMMENCEMENT  
ADDRESS



LAWRENCE COLLEGE

JUNE 10, 1962

# COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

*By* DOUGLAS MAITLAND KNIGHT

MEN AND WOMEN OF LAWRENCE,

My talk this afternoon is a secular analogue, in a way, to the distinguished sermon which we heard this morning; and my text for it is one of the best recent poems by Richard Wilbur, to whom we gave an honorary degree two years ago.

## ADVICE TO A PROPHET

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of  
our city,  
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,  
How should we dream of this place without us?—  
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,  
The long numbers that rocket the mind;  
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,  
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the  
race.  
How should we dream of this place without us?—  
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,  
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot  
conceive  
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost  
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blacken-  
ed by frost,  
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip  
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,  
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,  
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn  
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout  
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without  
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and  
spoken?  
Ask us, prophet, how we shall call  
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all  
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the  
clean  
Horse of our courage, in which beheld  
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,  
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose  
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding  
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing  
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

This is the holy day of our year, and the most  
significant day of the last four, for a good many of  
you. I must confess to my usual mixed emotions —  
pleasure that we are all in our proper places ready  
to celebrate your departure, but a strong sense that  
you will be sadly missed. One thing I must not  
miss is my final chance to make noises of guidance  
and counsel at you. From now on you will make  
them at me, I suppose; but before that moment  
comes what can I say — not to delay the event of  
your graduation, but to catch and hold it for a

moment? The most striking quality of the day, odd-  
ly enough, is that it cannot be fully caught by you;  
you are its prisoners, even though it is your success  
we celebrate. If I have any right to talk to you this  
afternoon it comes to me, not just from the years  
we have shared, but equally from the fact that in  
comparison with you I am outside the day, in the  
special sense that a critic is outside the painting he  
discusses. He is deeply involved, but he is neither  
the painter nor the work of art; and because he is  
not, he can have something to say about them  
both.

To take my image one step further, what have  
you created for yourselves here? A fantasy of your  
own emerging powers, a dream of what the world  
is and how you are going to overcome it, an articu-  
late hope about your place in human society, and  
an inarticulate fear about the world? All of these  
things, I imagine, and a hundred that are dearer  
and more intimate than any I could mention.  
Running through them all will be a constant  
question — there when you least realize it, like  
waves on a far beach. Your blood whispers to you,  
“What am I and where am I; and how do the  
person and the place belong together?” This is the  
question, not just for you but for every thoughtful  
man since time began. You may answer it in the  
words of the *Odyssey*, “Men suffer to make a song  
for the gods”; you may feel with Aeneas or Marcel  
Proust that you cannot perceive yourself without  
everything you and your world have been; you  
may find with St. Paul that reality comes in one  
blazing moment out of time. Whether you carry  
the burden of the years, or search out their free-  
dom, you are not fully human until you ask the  
question. And it has been our first obligation here  
to see that you become human, that you do ask  
what you can never fully answer, and that you  
recognize the others who have asked it.

Perhaps the center of your humanity, indeed, is truly to know that others exist. You may think this is simple, but I can promise you it is not. A man may take half his life discovering how to hear the voices when they speak, or how to see the faces of reality all around him. Precisely for this reason the most difficult exercises of the human mind and spirit relate to common questions. What is light, or space, or matter? How do men make choices and decisions? Can the good be known? Is beauty a state of mind, or a state of being? When we know that these are questions we share with one another, and that they are closer than the air we breathe, then we begin to behave like educated people. We move in the community of those who face with a good heart the mysterious, nagging infinity of the immediate — that quality in events which has always brought together the work of the best artists and the most thoughtful scientists. There are not two worlds, as Sir Charles Snow has suggested, nor are there ten; there is but one, and we prove our quality as men and women by the way that we respond to its questions.

These questions are more enduring than we, or they would not be worth asking at all. The quality of greatness in a man is perhaps measured by the dimension of his doubts, rather than by the scale of his immediate results. Leonardo looms so large in the mind, not merely for the greatness of a dozen pictures but for the even more dazzling visions of the artist's world, which a hundred of his questions make clear.

You must remember two things about these questions as they occur in your own heart. First, as you ask them, you will define your stature, but at the same time your limitation. Unless they are trivial questions (and that would be the most damning self-judgment of all), they are sure to outlast

you; they will remind your old age of all that you have not been able to do. This gap within you — between what you can ask and what you can answer — defines both your mortality and your humanity.

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
Ah! as the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;  
And yet you will weep and know why.  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sorrow's springs are the same.  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

But this is only half; these questions, these hopes, these unrealized ends which will outlast us all, would not exist if you — you individually — did not hold them in your mind and in your heart. To say this is not, I think, to make a subjective toy of the universe; it is, however, to admit that only the encounter between mind and world evokes reality — at least, that small segment of reality which we are equipped to recognize and comment on. It would be arrogant of us to claim that the universe is merely what we perceive; it would be naive to decide that what we perceive has no meaning because it is so partial. You prove yourselves as educated people by your willingness to accept a middle state — a state where your ignorance must often be your wisdom.

Let me translate for a moment from the range of intellectual insight to the range of overt action. A college, a church, a government, or a business makes exactly the same demand on us that is made



by the universe at large. None of us can claim to have given to any worthy institution all that it needs in the way of understanding, love, decision, and support. Often we work with it in ignorance or in doubt. On the other hand, each of us can see after a while the things that simply would not be without our individual effort, the things which have been brought to life even within the limited range of our competence. The same law holds for the world of ideas and the world of daily action, in short; the possible realities would not be actual without us. They may be small, they may be obscure, but they are real.

I look behind you at Main Hall as I say this, and not as one who is about to drown in his own sentiment. I mention the building, because those who built it were remarkable examples of the quality I am describing. Here in the wilderness, with no money, no loyal graduates, not even a dazzling class of seniors like yourselves, they might easily have decided to go home while they could in pursuit of something a little safer, a little surer of success than the enterprise they were engaged in. Instead they went down to the river, cut the stone, hauled it up, and built the enduring symbolic center of the College.

I could shift my ground to the gentlemen who receive honorary degrees today. Each of them is here because he has shown this kind of creative vigor, this recognition of what a human being can do with his talent — the talent which each of you has, to be used most wisely in your time, in your own way — the way, incidentally, which no one else could define, usurp, or displace, even if he wanted to.

What I put upon you this afternoon, I suppose, is simply the burden of your own reality. As edu-

cated people you cannot brush it off or argue it away. Along with it come insight and heartbreak, doubt and conviction, a growing assurance and a growing humility. As all these things develop for and in you, remember this: We are there in you too, because these are the things we are about. The fact, the measurement, the clear note, and the firm line — these have been your means in the last four years, and more than your means since they are now part of your texture, part of your nature, your reality. The end of it all, however, is not a fact or a form isolated; there is no such thing. The end of learning is wisdom alive in the heart — that final mystery where fact becomes judgment and you can say, with the educated men of the past, "I know where I am, and I know who I am." I could wish for you nothing more precious than this, and I could ask nothing more of us here than that we have truly set you on your way. May you be blest as you walk it, may you return to us often; and now I wish you Godspeed.